

Forgotten cosmopolitanism: revisiting the urban side of Bali

Through the course of the 20th century, the world's encounter with the island of Bali and its architectural landscape is profoundly guided by the well-established image of an exotic 'Balinese' cultural otherness. Scholars such as Adrian Vickers and Henk Schulte Nordholt have argued that this powerful image is a product of a complex entanglement between colonial knowledge production, an orientalist conception of cultural otherness, the rise of the travel industry, and unfolding local identity politics. And as popular writings on Bali tend to focus on the iconic religious sites, the traditional villages, and the ritual life of the island's indigenous communities, rural settings are the most referred context when talking about the island's architectural tradition. The historical and shifting urban environments – the capitals of Bali's competing pre-colonial royal courts as well as the colonial and subsequently contemporary urban settlements – remain largely unknown. At the same time, these urban realms are the most dramatically changing environments, compensating the calcifying conservation of the 'villages' as the island embraces its economic dependence on cultural tourism industry.

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THE MARGINALIZATION OF THE URBAN as 'un-Bali' is a recurring theme. Miguel Covarrubias (1937) began his renowned travel account of Bali by describing his dismay upon encountering the colonial town of Denpasar. In his words, "In the great 'alun-alun', the playground of Den Pasar, stolid Hollanders play tennis and drink beer near young Balinese playing soccer in striped sweatshirts [...] All around the square are the home of leading white residents, neat and bourgeois, small bungalows [...] The business street leading to the market [...] the same squalid shops [...] a small Chinese hotel, and curio stalls with mass production 'Balinese art', all kept by the same Chinese compradors, the same bearded Bombay merchants with eagle-like beaks [...] After the first bewildering days, when we had recovered from the shock of such distressing impressions as these, we began to 'discover' the real Bali [...] we found typical mud walls of the compounds, the thatched gates protected by mysterious signs [...] These were the proper setting for the lithe brown-skinned women returning from market with baskets of fruit on their head".¹ In a more recent observation, Don Townsend describes contemporary Denpasar, now the capital city of the island province, as "the main centre of change and profanity". He describes the latest wave of change moving across the island as "a process of physical, economic and psychological evasion of an unacceptable and culturally offensive way of urban living".²

The other Bali

Against the shifting architectural landscape of Denpasar the idea that there is a real Bali gains its urgency and realism. The urban Bali and its socio-cultural dynamic are subsequently perceived as a threat to the 'real Bali'. Such a perception problematically implies that the island's architectural and social history is largely a rural based phenomenon. It dissociates the urban from the historical as well as contemporary dynamics of the island, while denying the contemporary locals a chance to learn from their own urban past.

Revisiting the market district of Denpasar, the urban site rejected by Covarrubias, and reflecting on the way a more fluid interaction between urbanism and cosmopolitan cultural practices has unfolded in this place, gives us an opportunity to reposition the urban in our encounter with the island.

The market district is a reminder of an important role that trade and multiethnic relations played in the everyday life of southern Hindu Balinese courts at the turn of the 20th century. A Chinese Village (Kampung Cina), an Arab Village (Kampung Arab), a Hindu Balinese *banjar* (communal unit) and two traditional markets compose the district. Established during the reign of the Badung kingdom in late 19th century and subsequently further consolidated during colonial time, the ethnic and spatial composition of the area is captured in one of the oldest maps of Denpasar produced by H.M. Van Weede during the 1908 colonial expedition into the region.

The Chinese Village is lined with stores selling household items and agricultural products, Chinese medicine stores and pharmacies, as well as white goods and furniture outlets. The Arab village is famous for its textile market that supplies the colourful fabrics of the iconic ceremonial apparels worn by Hindu Balinese communities in their ritual processions. The two traditional markets, Kumbasari and Badung are the main sources of fresh produce, artwork as well as ceremonial elements central to the local Hindu community's ritual life.

The Chinese Village today is a dense neighbourhood lined with two to three-storey shophouses. The majority of its residents are Chinese Balinese traders who own and have run the businesses and properties for several generations. Some of these structures still resonate the Chinese shophouse architecture of the early 19th century colonial settlements throughout Java with its narrow but steep pitched roof. But the majority of the shophouses in Denpasar today reflect a widespread adoption of the art deco architectural expression, a popular architectural movement in colonial settlements throughout the Dutch East Indies during the 1920s and 1930s (fig. 1).

The Arab Village is an equally dense urban neighbourhood. Despite its name, the area is home to a mix of Middle Eastern, Pakistani and Indian traders, their businesses and families. A mosque is situated at the southern end of the neighbourhood, orientated towards Mecca. Similar to the Chinese shophouses, adoption of art deco architectural elements can also be observed here. The two and three storey shophouses in the Arab Village are accessible from the front and back. This way, the neighbourhood also has an active back laneway, which it shares with the adjacent Banjar Titih, the long-standing Hindu Balinese neighbourhood of the old Denpasar.

Thoroughly enclosed by the Arab and Chinese Villages, Banjar Titih is not visible from the main street of the district. A cluster of low-rise multi pavilion courtyard compounds, Banjar Titih is primarily built around the village temple Pura Dalem Padang Entas. Most of the dwelling compounds have been renovated and densified throughout the years in order to accommodate the banjar's growing community. What used to be a series of semi-open pavilion units, the compounds may now house a series of freestanding single-storey enclosed buildings, each containing a number of rooms. An adoption and adaptation of colonial bungalow style architecture can be found in a number of compounds.

Architectural hybridisation and cosmopolitan neighbourhoods

With its mixed-use function, social cultural diversity, and considerably high population density, the market district is a lively urban precinct where private and public realms intermingle effortlessly. More importantly, the ethnic neighbourhoods are not physically or socially detached from the others. Their co-existence is translated through a dense network of streets that connect and permeate

through and within the three neighbourhoods. The inhabitants of the three quarters also share public amenities in the area and interact with public spaces surrounding the Kumbasari and Badung markets, where food markets are held each night. Interactions between different ethnic communities have also taken place through marriage and participation in each neighbourhood's communal gatherings and social events. Through the years these interactions have triggered a range of appropriations of the physical structure of dwellings in each ethnic quarter, in order to accommodate the growing community. Most typical examples of these appropriations are the construction of a family Hindu Balinese temple (*pemerajan*) on the roof of a shophouse structure and the adoption of an enclosed living pavilion within the courtyard dwelling compounds.

Such interactions, and their physical traces in the form of architectural hybridisation, indicate an urban everyday life of a multi-ethnic community. This phenomenon is not unique to Denpasar. Mixed use and ethnically diverse districts can also be found in urban settlements in the northern region of Bali, such as Klungkung, Karangasem and Singaraja. These former capitals of the royal courts of 19th century Bali have an even longer span of historical encounters with colonialism and trading relations with Chinese and Middle Eastern traders. A hybrid urban form, featuring elements of Chinese shophouses, Art Deco architectural expressions, and Hindu Balinese tectonics, can be observed along the main market streets of these northern urban settlements of Bali.

Read against the intricate architectural traces of its cosmopolitan history, Denpasar today is less enthusiastic about embracing its multiethnic realities. Instead, privately developed gated housing estates, often ethnically and socially exclusive, are the main feature of the city's urban fringe development. Meanwhile, the city's authorities continue to be preoccupied by a mission to safeguard its perceived Balinese identity and cultural heritage. The recent government-led 'architectural restoration' of the market precinct of Denpasar exemplifies an unresolved tension between the city's actual existing urbanity and its conceived Balinese cultural identity. Before the market street could be promoted as part of the city's cultural heritage, a series of architectural restorations were undertaken. Restorations included the covering of Art Deco façades of the Chinese shophouses with materials such as red brick and sand carvings, which is considered to be 'traditional Balinese' architecture. The multi-ethnic collectivism that has long evolved in this part of Denpasar, and its diverse urban building typology, are now concealed by a 'Balinese looking' architectural finishing. The 'hidden' urban Denpasar exists as an invisible subject on an island where an imagined otherness has been seen as the only reality, at the cost of its own urban history, present and future.

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Notes

- Covarrubias, M. 1937. *The Island of Bali*, Oxford University Press, New York, see p.xx
- Townsend, D. 1994. 'Denpasar, Bali: Triumph of the Profane', in Askew, M. & W.S. Logan (eds.) *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in Southeast Asia: Interpretative Essays*, Geelong: Deakin University Press, see pp.228-230

Fig. 1 (above): The shophouses of Denpasar's Chinese Village